

FAITH IS A VERB
Matthew 7:21-29
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Many of us sat transfixed several weeks ago watching the televised series, Holocaust. We were at once fascinated and horrified, interested and appalled, curious yet outraged and deeply disturbed. The subject of Nazi genocide was discussed for weeks afterward: everywhere I went people were talking about it. The reviews of the project were not universally favorable. Eli Weisel, a survivor of the concentration camps who has written passionately about the experience thought the televised portrayal was unreal and misleading. There were, I thought, maudlin moments, irrelevant subplots and a transparent attempt to hook soap opera addicts with a "boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, girl dies" sequence that is a proven winner in America. But at other times I thought the project was brilliant.

There were some incidents that I shall not forget, a few done with exquisite irony. The most powerful and disturbing moment in the entire series, I thought, happened as Dorf, a rising young S.S. officer deeply involved in the administrative details of the concentration camps, is home on leave for Christmas. His wife and two children are the prototype of a fine, healthy, cultured family: they love him and are proud of him: he loves and is proud of them. On Christmas Eve, the tree is decorated, there are presents for all - someone suggests that they sing carols. His wife accompanies on a piano, confiscated from the apartment of a Jewish family that has been deported. And they sing "Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Calm, All is Bright." That, I thought, might have been the single most powerfully ironic scene ever viewed on television. I was interested to learn that it was not an easy scene to film. The actor who played the role of Dorf had walked off the set the first time around. The director followed him, found him overcome by his emotions and asking, "How could they have done it?"

The dehumanizing violence of the concentration camps was a shock to the senses. But, philosophically, there was no more tragic sequence in the series than that portrayal of the gap between a people's religious affirmation and their subsequent public behavior. Sensitive people are always aware of that gap. Sensitive people know that in a pressure-packed situation where life itself was at stake even St. Peter denied Christ. But here, the dynamic was presented in the most dramatic and radical terms possible. Somehow, an otherwise intelligent, sensitive man could sing "Silent Night" while arranging for Jewish babies to be executed. How was that possible? To watch the Christmas Eve sequence was to ask that question. And it was to be made terribly uncomfortable because we know the answer, at least in part. We give the answer every time we compromise, every time we choose expediency rather than risk, every time in the arena of political, economic, or social decision making we choose self-interest, self-protection instead of the will of God as we believe it was revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is an adolescent travesty to compare the United States with Nazi Germany. We bristle, appropriately, when someone tries to do it. Nevertheless, American Christianity does not always express its theology in ethical terms either. After all, just ten years ago we were drumming people out of the church because of their insistence that the Gospel of Jesus Christ had everything in the world to do with racial justice and peace. And today we are not at all enthusiastic about church involvement in complex matters such as world hunger, poverty and criminal justice. The Nazi government issued a clear directive to the churches: stick to religion: don't meddle in politics. The church today in the Soviet Union exists under the same dictate. And sometimes - God forgive us - we have said the same thing to ourselves.

The scripture texts for the day address the question from across the centuries. From the law of Moses, the words of the Book of Deuteronomy; "lay up these words of mine in your heart...bind them as a sign on your hand...as frontlets between your eyes...teach them to your children - write them on the doorposts of your house."

The genius of Israel's religion was its unique marriage of theology and ethics. The Torah was the law, but also the revelation of God. A righteous person was one who knew God and expressed that knowledge by living in accordance with God's holy law. Belief and behavior were one and the same. There was no theology in the speculative, philosophical sense. Believing in God had meaning only in the way a man treated his neighbor, his household, even his livestock.

The history of Israel is the story of the people constantly trying to separate belief and behavior. When the gap widened, when the nation forgot its genius, when the Temple became rich but the poor forgotten, some brave soul would raise a voice in protest and judgment. Thus Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

And Micah: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?...He has showed you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

That is Old Testament religion at its highest and best.

The New Testament Lesson this morning was the concluding section of the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most widely known corpus of ethical teaching in the world. It occupies the fifth through the seventh chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew and scholars remind us that it may be a collection of Jesus' ethical statements from throughout His three years of ministry rather than a single, one time address. The words bear the honor of history, they are a precious part of our civilization:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...
You are the salt of the earth...
Let your light so shine...
You have heard that it was said of old, 'You shall not kill; But
I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall
be liable to judgment.'
If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn to him the other also...
Love your enemies: pray for those who persecute you...
Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...
Do not be anxious about your life...
Judge not, that you be not judged..."

A composite of the highest and best: the Christian ethic in its purest form. Libraries have been written about each of the injunctions I have called to your attention. But, all things considered, the most important saying in the entire collection is the last one: the brief parable about two men who built houses - one on rock, the other on sand. The first builder's house withstood the storm; the other's did not. It fell - "and great was the fall of it", Jesus said. "Everyone who hears

these words of mine and does them is like that wiser man who chose a rock for his foundation."

Is the house in the parable a metaphor for the life of the individual, or the church? It could be either, or both. The point is that Jesus was perfectly serious about theology becoming ethics. He meant His disciples, apparently, to get on with the job of living out His words. Faith, for Him, was a verb. It did not describe something people had, but something they did.

Religion, however, sometimes functions to provide a way to avoid that. Faith, defined by American Christianity, divides into two major streams - knowledge and emotion. The psychologist William James once wrote that "most religion is either dull habit or acute fever." That is to say it is either dry and academic, or hot and emotional.

We, in the Presbyterian/Reformed clan are most comfortable with, and largely responsible for, a definition of faith that focuses on knowledge, reason, right thinking. Our forte has been the written and spoken word. We have given the world John Calvin, John Knox, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth. We have done theology and done it well. We invented the idea of public education. At the time of the Reformation we stripped the churches of subjective symbolism - painting, sculpture, stained glass - which might appeal to the emotions and replaced it with an exegetical, three point, scholarly sermon. We insisted that clergy need most of all, to be educated. And still, if you wish to stir up a nest of hornets, simply suggest that the academic requirements for ordination in the Presbyterian Church be lessened. Other communions may choose to believe that clergy must have a personal religious experience. We prefer that they be able to read the original Greek. The reason why the Presbyterian faith was not as successful on the American frontier as others is that we were insisting on a Princeton education for our preachers, while others settled for the ability to read the Bible and ride a horse.

The result has been a thoughtful and orderly approach to the Christian Faith. Put negatively, we have often defined personal faith in academic, intellectual terms. To believe in Jesus Christ is to understand certain ideas about Him. To have faith is to profess certain concepts to be true. We are most distrustful of the person who claims to know something without understanding it.

The other stream within American Christianity goes in the opposite direction. Here the focus is on feeling instead of understanding. Emotions, not intellect, are the target. Conversion to Jesus Christ is not so much comprehending certain ideas about Him as it is experiencing the power of His saving love. Religious celebration, accordingly, contrasts sharply with our style. Instead of a well thought-out order of worship, people are invited to feel the spirit, and to "let it happen".

The result has been not much theology, but a lot of enthusiasm and warmth. Put negatively, faith is a feeling, an overwhelming and not necessarily very rational emotionalism.

The divisions within American Christianity are largely between these two separate approaches to faith. The gap exists between denominations and, to a degree, within denominations. Each, however, needs the other. It is a mistake to minimize the role of either mind or heart in the matter of religion. The only conversion worth talking about is a conversion of mind as well as heart, will as well as feeling.

But if we take the little story which is our text very seriously, it ought to occur to us that we may combine the intellectual acumen of a Presbyterian and the emotional warmth of a good Baptist and still not approach the thing our Lord called Faith.

Faith, according to Jesus, I would submit, is neither knowing or feeling. It is, rather, doing. Faith, that is to say, is a verb. It is what you have when you do the words of Jesus. Relate that, if you will, to a young boy and baseball, a combination with which I have some experience. A boy can read the theology, so to speak: he can memorize the batting averages, know the history, watch the standings and follow the box scores with single-hearted zeal. He can experience the celebration: he can go to the park and watch a game, enter into the ritual, participate in the sacrament of hotdog and coke, join in the liturgical responses and have, if his favorite player hits a home run in the ninth, a tremendous emotional experience. That is to say, he can know and feel baseball. But the real thing - is out there on the field, or at the playground on a sunny Saturday morning. It's a matter of swinging a bat, and catching a ball, a matter of hitting and running and involvement, and sweating and striking out and sometimes crying. When he plays baseball, regardless of how well or poorly, he will have dealt with the reality. Having done it, he will know about it and feel about it a new and authentic way. Doing precedes knowing and true feeling.

That suggestion always comes as somewhat of a surprise to us even though we have experienced its truth in personal relationships. When a baby is born, whatever it is we have for the infant it is not knowledge based on objective data. We are called into action, we become parents, before we know the baby as a person, or understand much about him or her. Likewise, we act lovingly long before the baby has shown qualities that are lovable. That is to say, both knowledge and feelings are related to and grow out of the act of parenting. Likewise in marriage. If we waited until we knew one another totally we might never get married. Marrying is risky business precisely because we don't know one another fully, or even very well. The feeling of love is untested at the time of the ceremony. It can be no other. Knowledge of one another, enduring feeling follow the process of being married.

But in matters of faith, we reverse the process. Here, and here alone, we want to know it and feel it, before we do anything. We assume, wrongly I am convinced, that Jesus Christ wants us to believe certain things about Him, feel certain emotions about Him and then, depending on the relative intensity of our knowing and feeling He'd like us to do a few things for Him. That's backwards. He reversed it. When He dealt with people around Him He never, to my knowledge, asked them to believe anything as an intellectual exercise. Nor did He ask them to have certain emotional responses. Rather, the thrust, always, is on activity. Do this: do that: heal, teach, feed, love, forgive. Behavior is the name of the game. Live it - the knowing and the feeling part will follow.

The keenest observation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is precisely at this point. "Do not say you have not got faith," he wrote. "You will not have faith until you take the first step of obedience."

Well now, there is a lot here for consideration - for both church and individual. The business of this church, for instance, is doing the words of Jesus. It is the business of giving form and shape to the command to love and help and heal. Sometimes it appears that we would rather discuss it than do it. Sometimes it seems

like we Presbyterians are never happier than when we are planning, budgeting, evaluating, examining, rather than doing. But our business here at the corner of Broad and Garfield is giving life to orders our Lord Jesus Christ issued twenty centuries ago. If we are truly interested in the firmness of this institution's foundations we will be at least as concerned with the number of people fed from the food pantry as the quality of the anthems, or the number of children clothed as the stature of the pulpit. We will care as much about the impact we have on our community in the difficult days ahead as we do about our budget. Notice that Jesus was not a romantic about it. He didn't urge His followers to do His words because it would make them feel good. Rather, the foundation of the structure depended on it. If you really love this church, that is to say, keep insisting that it do the words of its Lord.

Personally, the structure of our own character must stand in the midst of some very real floods. Sickness, disappointment, grief have come and will come again. Our Lord was suggesting that there is a way to make it through without the whole structure coming apart at the seams. If I'm reading correctly, the way is not right thinking or right feeling, but right doing. We build, that is to say, lasting strength over the years into our own character by doing His will, by following and obeying Him.

We all want a strong and durable faith. Our mistake is in waiting for it to happen to us. Someone asked Dr. Samuel Shoemaker one time: "What can a person do to strengthen his religious faith?" He answered, "To tell the truth, I get a little tired of people who just sit around wringing their hands and wishing they had more faith. Or some faith. Wishing alone won't do it...If you want to learn something, you try it." (A Touch of Wonder, Arthur Gordon, p.113).

John Ruskin wrote: "Every duty we omit obscures some truth we might have known." (G. Buttrick, Parables, p.53).

The call to Christian Faith in this day is simply put. It is to do something for Jesus. Love more. Give something away. Help someone you don't have to help. Forgive someone who has offended you. Extend yourself a little bit. Sacrifice something. Feed someone who is hungry. Hug someone who is lonely. The promise is that a miracle will happen; a miracle of knowing and feeling called faith. It will happen in your life when you do the words of Jesus. That is His promise.

Amen.

Our Father, we confess that we have been waiting for it to happen to us. We acknowledge that we intend to do Your will just as soon as we understand more fully and feel more deeply. Forgive us for having it all backwards. Give us courage to obey Your will, today: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.